

1916

THE 1916 RISING:
PERSONALITIES &
PERSPECTIVES

an online exhibition



- 3.
- 3. 4. **Those who set the stage**
Those primarily concerned with Irish culture

3. 4. 1. **Michael Cusack, Maurice Davin and the Gaelic Athletic Association**

Although not formally involved in the 1916 Rising, the Gaelic Athletic Association contributed significantly by producing a generation of young men with a sense of national identity, an extreme nationalist ethos, and a hostility towards the government, state institutions, and the forces of law and order.

Michael Cusack (1847-1906) was born at Carron near Corofin, Co. Clare, the son of a herdsman. He qualified as a primary and secondary teacher. Following some years in the United States, he taught in a school in Newry, Co. Down, Blackrock College, Co. Dublin and Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare. In 1877 he set up the Civil Service Academy which prepared students for civil service and other professional examinations. In his youth Cusack was a distinguished athlete and in Dublin he became involved in organising athletics. He established a hurling club as a feature of his Academy, and was involved in various attempts to revive the game in Dublin.

Cusack was passionately interested in Gaelic culture and was active in the movement for the revival of the Irish language. Like many other nationalists of the time, he regarded athletics and the games of hurling, football and handball as intrinsic features of traditional Irish culture; he believed that they should be used to promote a distinctive national identity. He was supported by two national newspapers, *United Ireland* and *The Irishman*, which published a number of his anonymous articles on the subject of traditional games and pastimes.

Cusack's interest in traditional games was shared by many, but especially by Maurice Davin (1841-1927), a farmer near Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary and a former athlete with an international reputation. On 11 October 1884 *United Ireland* and *The Irishman* featured an article by Cusack, entitled 'A Word About Irish Athletics'. Two weeks later Davin published a letter in the same papers expressing rather similar sentiments.

On 1 November 1884 Cusack and Davin convened a meeting at Hayes's Hotel in Thurles, Co. Tipperary, at which the Gaelic Association for the Preservation and Cultivation of Gaelic Games (later the Gaelic Athletic Association) was established with Davin as president and Cusack as secretary. As the GAA was an organisation with potentially a membership of some hundreds of thousands of fit young men of military age and represented throughout the country, the Fenians recognised its value as a recruitment pool. As a result, Fenians infiltrated the organisation and managed to gain effective control within two years, ousting Cusack from the position of secretary. Clerical opposition to Fenian influence, however, resulted in a more discreet exploitation of the organisation by the Fenians: in the early decades of the twentieth century many of the leaders were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood or in sympathy with its aims. While not overtly a revolutionary movement, the GAA was resolutely nationalistic, excluding members of the police or armed forces and people who played 'imported games'.

Members of the GAA were prominent in the Irish Volunteers, hurleys commonly appearing in place of guns in drill and training exercises. Many members of the GAA took part in the 1916 Rising, but only in an individual capacity. As already said, the Association may be said to have indirectly made a significant contribution to the Rising. It produced a generation of physically fit and self-confident young men, many of whom it equipped with organisational skills of a high order. It fostered an awareness of Irish identity and pride in being Irish, resulting in a more critical attitude towards Britain, its government and its agencies.



Michael Cusack; he has been immortalised as 'The Citizen' in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.



Maurice Davin.

The Irishman.

No movement having for its object the social and political advancement of a nation from the tyranny of imported and enforced customs and manners can be regarded as perfect if it has not made adequate provision for the preservation and cultivation of the National pastimes of the people. Voluntary neglect of such pastimes is a sure sign of National decay and of approaching dissolution. The strength and energy of a race are largely dependent on the National pastimes for the development of a spirit of courage and endurance. A warlike race is ever fond of games requiring skill, strength, and staying-power. The best games of such a race are never free from danger. But when a race is declining in martial spirit, no matter from what cause, the national games are neglected at first and then forgotten. And as the corrupting and degrading influences first manifest themselves in capital towns and large cities, so, too, we find that the national pastimes and racial characteristics first fade and disappear from such large centres of population. And further, as persons whose reason is unhinged often put off the substantial and decent clothes suitable to their condition, and deck themselves in gaudy frippery and fading flowers, thereby demonstrating that the throne of man's dignity is uncrowned, so, too, we find the deteriorating residents of cities and the thoughtless votaries of fashion ever impotently looking out with feverish anxiety for some change in their dreary pastimes after having abandoned those of the people. The corrupting influences which for several years have been devastating the sporting grounds of our cities and towns are fast spreading to our rural population. Foreign and hostile laws and the pernicious influence of a hated and hitherto dominant race drove the Irish people from their trysting-places at the cross-roads and hurling fields back to their cabins where but a few short years before famine and fever reigned supreme. In these wretched homes—homes consecrated by sufferings which should appal the devil—the Irish peasant too often wasted his evenings and his holidays in smoking and card-playing. A few years later a so-called revival of athletics was inaugurated in Ireland. The new movement did not originate with those who have ever had any sympathy with Ireland or the Irish people. Accordingly labourers, tradesmen, artists, and even policemen and soldiers were excluded from the few competitions which constituted the lame and halting programme of the promoters. Two years ago every man who did not make his living either wholly or partly by athletics was allowed to compete. But with this concession came a law which is as intolerable as its existence in Ireland is degrading. The law is, that all Athletic Meetings shall be held under the rules of the Amateur Athletic Association of England, and that any person competing at any meeting not held under these rules should be ineligible to compete elsewhere. The management of nearly all the meetings held in Ireland since has been entrusted to persons hostile to all the dearest aspirations of the Irish people. Every effort has been made to make the meetings look as English as possible—foot-races, betting, and flagrant cheating being their most prominent features. Swarms of pot-hunting mashers sprang into existence. They formed Harrier Clubs, for the purpose of training through the winter, after the fashion of English professional athletes, that they might be able to win and pawn the prizes offered for competition in the summer. We tell the Irish people to take the management of their games into their own hands, to encourage and promote in every way every form of athletics which is peculiarly Irish, and to remove with one sweep everything foreign and iniquitous in the present system. The vast majority of the best athletes in Ireland are Nationalists. These gentlemen should take the matter in hand at once, and draft laws for the guidance of the promoters of meetings in Ireland next year. The people pay the expenses of the meetings, and the representatives of the people should have the controlling power. It is only by such an arrangement that pure Irish athletics will be revived, and that the incomparable strength and physique of our Race will be preserved.

Cusack's article entitled, 'A Word about Irish Athletics', appeared in *The Irishman* and *United Ireland*. It inspired Davin to publish a rather similar article in the two papers.

181 W.J.
235

SOUTH WESTERN DIVISION.

401
15690

Crime Department—Special Branch.

SUBJECT *Modus operandi of seducing one
of the G. A. A. into the I. R. B. society.*

Cork, *14th April* 1890.

I.G.

Hints are given to the member of the G. A. A. intended to be practised on that the person addressing him belongs to a higher club. The Manchester Martyrs are eulogized, & other "patriots" praised up—such as Emmet, Lord Edward Fitzgerald &c. At the same time a close watch is kept on the patient to observe how the bait takes. If it appears successful the next step is to ask him if he would not wish to do likewise? If the

answer is in the affirmative the questioner then admits he is a follower of these patriots. The candidate is then tested to see if he will "blab". He is treated to plenty of drink, & tested whether he can hold his tongue. If found all right, he is requested to accompany the person who first broached the subject to a place named to meet a person unknown to him. The place is always dark, & when there he is asked by the unknown whether he is satisfied to join the I. R. B. & fight for the Republic when called on. On answering in the affirmative, he is duly sworn.

W. Jones
2168.

A report submitted by District Inspector William Jones of the Royal Irish Constabulary outlining how members of the Gaelic Athletic Association were recruited to the Irish Republican Brotherhood. It does not sound very convincing; perhaps Jones - like many a policeman before and since - had been spun a yarn. The document is in the Crime Special files in the National Archives (S.P.O. CBS 2701/S).